Commentary

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The Case for Bombing Iran

If the ayatollahs acquire nuclear weapons, it will be too late—and too costly—to act.

by Norman Podhoretz

ALTHOUGH MANY PERSIST IN DENYING IT, I CONTINUE TO BELIEVE that what September 11, 2001 did was to plunge us headlong into nothing less than another world war. I call this new war World War IV, because I also believe that what is generally known as the cold war was actually World War III, and that this one bears a closer resemblance to that great conflict than it does to World War II. Like the cold war, as the military historian Eliot Cohen was the first to recognize, the one we are now in has ideological roots, pitting us against Islamofascism, yet another mutation of the totalitarian disease we defeated first in the shape of Nazism and fascism and then in the shape of Communism; it is global in scope; it is being fought with a variety of weapons, not all of them military; and it is likely to go on for decades.

What follows from this way of looking at the last five years is that the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq cannot be understood if they are regarded as self-contained wars in their own right. Instead we have to see them as fronts or theaters that have been opened up in the early stages of a protracted global struggle. The same thing is true of Iran. As the currently main center of the Islamofascist ideology against which we have been fighting since 9/11, and as (according to the State Department's latest annual report on the subject) the main sponsor of the terrorism that is Islamofascism's weapon of choice, Iran too is a front in World War IV. Moreover, its effort to build a nuclear arsenal makes it the potentially most dangerous one of all.

The Iranians, of course, never cease denying that they intend to build a nuclear arsenal, and yet in the same breath they openly tell us what they intend to do with it. Their first priority, as repeatedly and unequivocally announced by their president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is to "wipe Israel off the map"—a feat that could not be accomplished by conventional weapons alone.

But Ahmadinejad's ambitions are not confined to the destruction of Israel. He also wishes to dominate the greater Middle East, and thereby to control the oilfields of the region and the flow of oil out of it through the Persian Gulf. If he acquired a nuclear capability, he would not even have to use it in order to put all this within his reach. Intimidation and blackmail by themselves would do the trick.

Nor are Ahmadinejad's ambitions merely regional in scope. He has a larger dream of extending the power and influence of Islam throughout Europe, and this too he hopes to accomplish by playing on the fear that resistance to Iran would lead to a nuclear war. And then, finally, comes the largest dream of all: what Ahmadinejad does not shrink from describing as "a world without America." Demented though he may be, I doubt that Ahmadinejad is so crazy as to imagine that he could wipe America off the map even if he had nuclear weapons. But what he probably does envisage is a diminution of the American will to oppose him: that is, if not a world without America, he will settle, at least in the short run, for a world without much American influence.

Not surprisingly, the old American foreign-policy establishment and many others say that these dreams are nothing more than the fantasies of a madman. They also dismiss those who think otherwise as neoconservative alarmists trying to drag this country into another senseless war that is in the interest not of the United States but only of Israel. But the irony is that Ahmadinejad's dreams are more realistic than the dismissal of those dreams as merely insane delusions. To understand why, an analogy with World War III may help.

At certain points in that earlier war, some of us feared that the Soviets might seize control of the oil fields of the Middle East, and that the West, faced with a choice between surrendering to their dominance or trying to

stop them at the risk of a nuclear exchange, would choose surrender. In that case, we thought, the result would be what in those days went by the name of Finlandization.

In Europe, where there were large Communist parties, Finlandization would take the form of bringing these parties to power so that they could establish "Red Vichy" regimes like the one already in place in Finland—regimes whose subservience to the Soviet will in all things, domestic and foreign alike, would make military occupation unnecessary and would therefore preserve a minimal degree of national independence.

In the United States, where there was no Communist party to speak of, we speculated that Finlandization would take a subtler form. In the realm of foreign affairs, politicians and pundits would arise to celebrate the arrival of a new era of peace and friendship in which the cold-war policy of containment would be scrapped, thus giving the Soviets complete freedom to expand without encountering any significant obstacles. And in the realm of domestic affairs, Finlandization would mean that the only candidates running for office with a prayer of being elected would be those who promised to work toward a sociopolitical system more in harmony with the Soviet model than the unjust capitalist plutocracy under which we had been living.

Of course, by the grace of God, the dissidents behind the Iron Curtain, and Ronald Reagan, we won World War III and were therefore spared the depredations that Finlandization would have brought. Alas, we are far

from knowing what the outcome of World War IV will be. But in the meantime, looking at Europe today, we already see the unfolding of a process analogous to Finlandization: it has been called, rightly, Islamization. Consider, for example, what happened when, only a few weeks ago, the Iranians captured fifteen British sailors and marines and held them hostage. Did the Royal Navy, which once boasted that it ruled the waves, immediately retaliate against this blatant act of aggression, or even threaten to do so unless the captives were immediately released? Not by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed, using force was the last thing in the world the British contemplated doing, as they made sure to announce. Instead they relied on the "soft power" so beloved of "sophisticated" Europeans and their American fellow travelers.

But then, as if this show of impotence were not humiliating enough, the British were unable even to mobilize any of that soft power. The European Union, of which they are a member, turned down their request to threaten Iran with a freeze of imports. As for the UN, under whose very auspices they were patrolling the international waters in which the sailors were kidnapped, it once again showed its true colors by refusing even to condemn the Iranians. The most the Security Council could bring itself to do was to express "grave concern." Meanwhile, a member of the British cabinet was going the Security Council one better. While registering no objection to propaganda pictures of the one woman hostage, who had been forced to shed her uniform and dress for the cameras in Muslim clothing, Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt pronounced it "deplorable" that she

should have permitted herself to be photographed with a cigarette in her mouth. “This,” said Hewitt, “sends completely the wrong message to our young people.”

According to John Bolton, our former ambassador to the UN, the Iranians were testing the British to see if there would be any price to pay for committing what would once have been considered an act of war. Having received his answer, Ahmadinejad could now reap the additional benefit of, as the British commentator Daniel Johnson puts it, “posing as a benefactor” by releasing the hostages, even while ordering more attacks in Iraq and even while continuing to arm terrorist organizations, whether Shiite (Hizballah) or Sunni (Hamas). For fanatical Shiites though Ahmadinejad and his ilk assuredly are, they are obviously willing to set sectarian differences aside when it comes to forging jihadist alliances against the infidels.

If, then, under present circumstances Ahmadinejad could bring about the extraordinary degree of kowtowing that resulted from the kidnapping of the British sailors, what might he not accomplish with a nuclear arsenal behind him—nuclear bombs that could be fitted on missiles capable of reaching Europe? As to such a capability, Robert G. Joseph, the U.S. Special Envoy for Nuclear Non-Proliferation, tells us that Iran is “expanding what is already the largest offensive missile force in the region. Moreover, it is reported to be working closely with North Korea, the world’s number-one missile proliferator, to develop even more capable ballistic missiles.” This, Joseph goes on, is why “analysts agree that in the

foreseeable future Iran will be armed with medium- and long-range ballistic missiles," and it is also why "we could wake up one morning to find that Iran is holding Berlin, Paris or London hostage to whatever its demands are then."

As with Finlandization, Islamization extends to the domestic realm, too. In one recent illustration of this process, as reported in the British press, "schools in England are dropping the Holocaust from history lessons to avoid offending Muslim pupils . . . whose beliefs include Holocaust denial." But this is an equal-opportunity capitulation, since the schools are also eliminating lessons about the Crusades because "such lessons often contradict what is taught in local mosques."

But why single out England? If anything, much more, and worse, has been going on in other European countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. All of these countries have large and growing Muslim populations demanding that their religious values and sensibilities be accommodated at the expense of the traditional values of the West, and even in some instances of the law. Yet rather than insisting that, like all immigrant groups before them, they assimilate to Western norms, almost all European politicians have been cravenly giving in to the Muslims' outrageous demands.

As in the realm of foreign affairs, if this much can be accomplished under present circumstances, what might not be done if the process were being backed by Iranian nuclear blackmail? Already some observers are warning that by the end of the 21st century the whole of Europe will be transformed into a place to which they give the name Eurabia. Whatever chance there may still be of heading off this eventuality would surely be lessened by the menacing shadow of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons, and only too ready to put them into the hands of the terrorist groups to whom it is even now supplying rockets and other explosive devices.

And the United States? As would have been the case with Finlandization, we would experience a milder form of Islamization here at home. But not in the area of foreign policy. Like the Europeans, confronted by Islamofascists armed by Iran with nuclear weapons, we would become more and more hesitant to risk resisting the emergence of a world shaped by their will and tailored to their wishes. For even if Ahmadinejad did not yet have missiles with a long enough range to hit the United States, he would certainly be able to unleash a wave of nuclear terror against us. If he did, he would in all likelihood act through proxies, for whom he would with characteristic brazenness disclaim any responsibility even if the weapons used by the terrorists were to bear telltale markings identifying them as of Iranian origin. At the same time, the opponents of retaliation and other antiwar forces would rush to point out that there was good reason to accept this disclaimer and, markings or no markings (could they not have been forged?), no really solid evidence to refute it.

In any event, in these same centers of opinion, such a scenario is regarded as utter nonsense. In their view, none of the things it envisages would follow even if Ahmadinejad should get the bomb, because the fear of retaliation would deter him from attacking us just as it deterred the Soviets in World War III. For our part, moreover, the knowledge that we were safe from attack would preclude any danger of our falling into anything like Islamization.

But listen to what Bernard Lewis, the greatest authority of our time on the Islamic world, has to say in this context on the subject of deterrence:

> MAD, mutual assured destruction, [was effective] right through the cold war. Both sides had nuclear weapons. Neither side used them, because both sides knew the other would retaliate in kind. This will not work with a religious fanatic [like Ahmadinejad]. For him, mutual assured destruction is not a deterrent, it is an inducement. We know already that [Iran's leaders] do not give a damn about killing their own people in great numbers. We have seen it again and again. In the final scenario, and this applies all the more strongly if they kill large numbers of their own people, they are doing them a favor. They are giving them a quick free pass to heaven and all its delights.

Nor are they inhibited by a love of country:

> We do not worship Iran, we worship Allah. For patriotism is another name for paganism. I say let this land [Iran] burn. I say let this land go up in smoke, provided Islam emerges triumphant in the rest of the world.

These were the words of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who ruled Iran from 1979 to 1989, and there is no reason to suppose that his disciple Ahmadinejad feels any differently.

Still less would deterrence work where Israel was concerned. For as the Ayatollah Rafsanjani (who is supposedly a "pragmatic conservative") has declared:

> If a day comes when the world of Islam is duly equipped with the arms Israel has in possession. . . application of an atomic bomb would not leave anything in Israel, but the same thing would just produce damages in the Muslim world.

In other words, Israel would be destroyed in a nuclear exchange, but Iran would survive.

In spite of all this, we keep hearing that all would be well if only we agreed —in the currently fashionable lingo—to "engage" with Iran, and that even if the worst came to the worst we could—to revert to the same lingo—"live" with a nuclear Iran. It is when such things are being said that, alongside the resemblance between now and World War III, a parallel also becomes evident between now and the eve of World War II.

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CHOOSE A PLAN

By 1938, Germany under Adolf Hitler had for some years been rearming in defiance of its obligations under the Versailles treaty and other international agreements. Yet even though Hitler in *Mein Kampf* had explicitly spelled out the goals he was now preparing to pursue, scarcely anyone took him seriously. To the imminent victims of the war he was soon to start, Hitler's book and his inflammatory speeches were nothing more than braggadocio or, to use the more colorful word Hannah Arendt once applied to Adolf Eichmann, rodomontade: the kind of red meat any politician might throw to his constituents at home. Hitler might sound at

times like a madman, but in reality he was a shrewd operator with whom one could—in the notorious term coined by the London *Times*—"do business." The business that was done under this assumption was the Munich Agreement of 1938, which the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared had brought "peace in our time."

It was thanks to Munich that "appeasement" became one of the dirtiest words in the whole of our political vocabulary. Yet appeasement had always been an important and entirely respectable tool of diplomacy, signifying the avoidance of war through the alleviation of the other side's grievances. If Hitler had been what his eventual victims imagined he was—that is, a conventional statesman pursuing limited aims and using the threat of war only as a way of strengthening his bargaining position—it would indeed have been possible to appease him and thereby to head off the outbreak of another war.

But Hitler was not a conventional statesman and, although for tactical reasons he would sometimes pretend otherwise, he did not have limited aims. He was a revolutionary seeking to overturn the going international system and to replace it with a new order dominated by Germany, which also meant the political culture of Nazism. As such, he offered only two choices: resistance or submission. Finding this reality unbearable, the world persuaded itself that there was a way out, a third alternative, in negotiations. But given Hitler's objectives, and his barely concealed lust for war, negotiating with him could not conceivably have led to peace. It could have had only one outcome, which was to buy him more time to start a war

under more favorable conditions. As most historians now agree, if he had been taken at his own word about his true intentions, he could have been stopped earlier and defeated at an infinitely lower cost.

Which brings us back to Ahmadinejad. Like Hitler, he is a revolutionary whose objective is to overturn the going international system and to replace it in the fullness of time with a new order dominated by Iran and ruled by the religio-political culture of Islamofascism. Like Hitler, too, he is entirely open about his intentions, although—again like Hitler—he sometimes pretends that he wants nothing more than his country's just due. In the case of Hitler in 1938, this pretense took the form of claiming that no further demands would be made if sovereignty over the Sudetenland were transferred from Czechoslovakia to Germany. In the case of Ahmadinejad, the pretense takes the form of claiming that Iran is building nuclear facilities only for peaceful purposes and not for the production of bombs.

But here we come upon an interesting difference between then and now. Whereas in the late 1930's almost everyone believed, or talked himself into believing, that Hitler was telling the truth when he said he had no further demands to make after Munich, no one believes that Ahmadinejad is telling the truth when he says that Iran has no wish to develop a nuclear arsenal. In addition, virtually everyone agrees that it would be best if he were stopped, only not, God forbid, with military force—not now, and not ever.

But if military force is ruled out, what is supposed to do the job?

Well, to begin with, there is that good old standby, diplomacy. And so, for three-and-a-half years, even pre-dating the accession of Ahmadinejad to the presidency, the diplomatic gavotte has been danced with Iran, in negotiations whose carrot-and-stick details no one can remember—not even, I suspect, the parties involved. But since, to say it again, Ahmadinejad is a revolutionary with unlimited aims and not a statesman with whom we can "do business," all this negotiating has had the same result as Munich had with Hitler. That is, it has bought the Iranians more time in which they have moved closer and closer to developing nuclear weapons.

Then there are sanctions. As it happens, sanctions have very rarely worked in the past. Worse yet, they have usually ended up hurting the hapless people of the targeted country while leaving the leadership unscathed. Nevertheless, much hope has been invested in them as a way of bringing Ahmadinejad to heel. Yet thanks to the resistance of Russia and China, both of which have reasons of their own to go easy on Iran, it has proved enormously difficult for the Security Council to impose sanctions that could even conceivably be effective. At first, the only measures to which Russia and China would agree were much too limited even to bite. Then, as Iran continued to defy Security Council resolutions and to block inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it was

bound by treaty to permit, not even the Russians and the Chinese were able to hold out against stronger sanctions. Once more, however, these have had little or no effect on the progress Iran is making toward the development of a nuclear arsenal. On the contrary: they, too, have bought the Iranians additional time in which to move ahead.

Since hope springs eternal, some now believe that the answer lies in more punishing sanctions. This time, however, their purpose would be not to force Iran into compliance, but to provoke an internal uprising against Ahmadinejad and the regime as a whole. Those who advocate this course tell us that the "mullocracy" is very unpopular, especially with young people, who make up a majority of Iran's population. They tell us that these young people would like nothing better than to get rid of the oppressive and repressive and corrupt regime under which they now live and to replace it with a democratic system. And they tell us, finally, that if Iran were so transformed, we would have nothing to fear from it even if it were to acquire nuclear weapons.

Once upon a time, under the influence of Bernard Lewis and others I respect, I too subscribed to this school of thought. But after three years and more of waiting for the insurrection they assured us back then was on the verge of erupting, I have lost confidence in their prediction. Some of them blame the Bush administration for not doing enough to encourage an uprising, which is why they have now transferred their hopes to sanctions that would inflict so much damage on the Iranian economy that the entire populace would rise up against the rulers. Yet whether or not this might

happen under such circumstances, there is simply no chance of getting Russia and China, or the Europeans for that matter, to agree to the kind of sanctions that are the necessary precondition.

At the outset I stipulated that the weapons with which we are fighting World War IV are not all military—that they also include economic, diplomatic, and other nonmilitary instruments of power. In exerting pressure for reform on countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, these nonmilitary instruments are the right ones to use. But it should be clear by now to any observer not in denial that Iran is not such a country. As we know from Iran's defiance of the Security Council and the IAEA even while the United States has been warning Ahmadinejad that "all options" remain on the table, ultimatums and threats of force can no more stop him than negotiations and sanctions have managed to do. Like them, all they accomplish is to buy him more time.

In short, the plain and brutal truth is that if Iran is to be prevented from developing a nuclear arsenal, there is no alternative to the actual use of military force—any more than there was an alternative to force if Hitler was to be stopped in 1938.

Since a ground invasion of Iran must be ruled out for many different reasons, the job would have to be done, if it is to be done at all, by a campaign of air strikes. Furthermore, because Iran's nuclear facilities are

dispersed, and because some of them are underground, many sorties and bunker-busting munitions would be required. And because such a campaign is beyond the capabilities of Israel, and the will, let alone the courage, of any of our other allies, it could be carried out only by the United States.* Even then, we would probably be unable to get at all the underground facilities, which means that, if Iran were still intent on going nuclear, it would not have to start over again from scratch. But a bombing campaign would without question set back its nuclear program for years to come, and might even lead to the overthrow of the mullahs.

The opponents of bombing—not just the usual suspects but many both here and in Israel who have no illusions about the nature and intentions and potential capabilities of the Iranian regime—disagree that it might end in the overthrow of the mullocracy. On the contrary, they are certain that all Iranians, even the democratic dissidents, would be impelled to rally around the flag. And this is only one of the worst-case scenarios they envisage. To wit: Iran would retaliate by increasing the trouble it is already making for us in Iraq. It would attack Israel with missiles armed with non-nuclear warheads but possibly containing biological and/or chemical weapons. There would be a vast increase in the price of oil, with catastrophic consequences for every economy in the world, very much including our own. The worldwide outcry against the inevitable civilian casualties would make the anti-Americanism of today look like a love-fest.

I readily admit that it would be foolish to discount any or all of these scenarios. Each of them is, alas, only too plausible. Nevertheless, there is a good response to them, and it is the one given by John McCain. The only thing worse than bombing Iran, McCain has declared, is allowing Iran to get the bomb.

And yet those of us who agree with McCain are left with the question of whether there is still time. If we believe the Iranians, the answer is no. In early April, at Iran's Nuclear Day festivities, Ahmadinejad announced that the point of no return in the nuclearization process had been reached. If this is true, it means that Iran is only a small step away from producing nuclear weapons. But even supposing that Ahmadinejad is bluffing, in order to convince the world that it is already too late to stop him, how long will it take before he actually turns out to have a winning hand?

If we believe the CIA, perhaps as much as ten years. But CIA estimates have so often been wrong that they are hardly more credible than the boasts of Ahmadinejad. Other estimates by other experts fall within the range of a few months to six years. Which is to say that no one really knows. And because no one really knows, the only prudent—indeed, the only *responsible*—course is to assume that Ahmadinejad may not be bluffing, or may only be exaggerating a bit, and to strike at him as soon as it is logistically possible.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush made a promise:

> We'll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons.

In that speech, the President was referring to Iraq, but he has made it clear on a number of subsequent occasions that the same principle applies to Iran. Indeed, he has gone so far as to say that if we permit Iran to build a nuclear arsenal, people 50 years from now will look back and wonder how we of this generation could have allowed such a thing to happen, and they will rightly judge us as harshly as we today judge the British and the French for what they did and what they failed to do at Munich in 1938. I find it hard to understand why George W. Bush would have put himself so squarely in the dock of history on this issue if he were resigned to leaving office with Iran in possession of nuclear weapons, or with the ability to build them. Accordingly, my guess is that he intends, within the next 21 months, to order air strikes against the Iranian nuclear facilities from the three U.S. aircraft carriers already sitting nearby.